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Relation and Responsibility: A Levinasian Reading of King Lear

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Relation and Responsibility: A Levinasian Reading of *King Lear*

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To escape the “there is,” one must not be posed but deposed;
to make an act of deposition, in the sense one speaks of de-
posed kings. This deposition of sovereignty by the ego is the
social relationship with the Other, the dis-inter-ested relation.
(EMMANUEL LEVINAS)¹

The late philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1905–95) is frequently celebrated as one of the twentieth century’s most astute and insightful readers of Husserl and Heidegger. Yet Levinas was also an attentive reader of Shakespeare. He specifically mentions Shakespeare when talking of his early influences, and he includes the English playwright in a list of authors whose art he admires.² Levinas’s great work *Otherwise than Being* (1974) alludes to both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* on its very first page, and his collected works contain more references to Shakespeare than to any other author, save Dostoyevsky. Indeed, Levinas refers to Shakespeare so frequently in the lectures from 1946 and 1947 published under the title *Time and the Other* that he feels compelled at one point to pause and beg pardon for having “overindulged” himself. The self-deprecating gesture, of course, does not prevent him from going on to say more about Shakespeare, nor does it really apologize for anything. Less an apology than a justification, Levinas excuses his literary allusiveness by provocatively suggesting that Shakespeare is at the

The origins of this essay trace back to an undergraduate honors thesis written in 1994 at Brigham Young University under the direction of Richard Duerden and Bruce Young. It was presented in revised form at the 2007 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in a seminar organized by Douglas Trevor and Kristen Poole. Its current state owes a great deal to the generosity and insight of several anonymous readers.

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 52.

2. Ibid., 22, and Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 138.

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center of all philosophical activity. "It sometimes seems to me," Levinas says, "that the whole of philosophy is only a meditation of Shakespeare."³

Although Levinas is not alone in ascribing a philosophical thickness to Shakespeare's oeuvre, what makes his claim especially intriguing (aside from its arresting hyperbole) is the kind of philosophizing it takes the plays to be performing. For by way of his recurrent allusions, Levinas would make Shakespeare proximate to his own philosophical position that the "I" cannot exist apart from the other, that the self comes into being only in and through the interpersonal relation. At first glance, this might seem an easy thing to say of an early modern author, since it is commonplace to describe identity in the early modern era as a relational construct, arising from any number of social networks or situations. But Levinas's claims about subjectivity and Shakespeare go well beyond our work on the self-constituting effects of kinship, ethnicity, sex, rank, and profession. As Alphonso Lingis notes, Levinas's ideas about intersubjectivity are nothing short of "anarchic."⁴ They have profoundly changed our reading of philosophy, and they can change our reading of Shakespeare as well. To demonstrate what I mean, I propose to use Levinas to put philosophical pressure on Shakespeare's dramatization of human relatedness in *The Tragedy of King Lear* (1607–8). Even though Levinas does not discuss *Lear* at length in any of his published work, this difficult philosopher and this difficult play have much to say to one another.⁵ As I will show, Levinas can be fruitfully brought to bear on Shakespeare's great tragedy, generating fresh and productive ideas about its most pivotal moments, its most perplexing questions, and its most popular interpretations. In addition, Levinas can provide a useful frame for

3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 72.

4. Alphonso Lingis, "Translator's Introduction," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), xx.

5. For other readings of *Lear* informed by Levinas, see Seán Lawrence, "The Difficulty of Dying in *King Lear*," *English Studies in Canada* 31 (2005): 35–52; and James Kearney, "This Is Above All Strangeness': *King Lear*, Ethics, and the Phenomenology of Recognition," *Criticism* 54 (2012): 455–67. Both of these essays, which I unfortunately did not discover until late in the writing of my own essay, relate to mine in interesting ways. For additional interpretations of Shakespeare influenced by Levinas, see Geoff Baker, "Other Capital: Investment, Return, Alterity, and *The Merchant of Venice*," *Upstart Crow* 22 (2002): 21–36; Jeremy Tambling, "Levinas and *Macbeth*'s 'Strange Images of Death,'" *Essays in Criticism* 54 (2004): 351–72; David Ruiters, "Harry's (In)Human Face," in *Spiritual Shakespeares*, ed. Ewan Fernie (London: Routledge, 2005), 50–72; Steven Shankman, "The Idea of Europe, Levinas, and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*," in *Engaging Europe: Rethinking a Changing Continent*, ed. Evelyn Gould and George J. Sheridan Jr. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 63–78; and Seán Lawrence, "Listening to Lavinia: Emmanuel Levinas's Saying and Said in *Titus Andronicus*," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Suffering, the Sacred, and the Sublime in Literature and Theory*, ed. Holly Faith Nelson, Lynn R. Szabo, and Jens Zimmermann (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 57–69.

discussing the nature of the response the stage play requires of us, both as audience members and literary critics. Levinas, I suggest, goes some distance toward helping us think what it might mean to “speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (5.3.299).⁶

* * *

The difficult relation between self and other that lies at the heart of Shakespeare’s stagecraft is both the core and crux of Levinas’s phenomenology. Its primacy is expressed in Levinas’s oft-repeated assertion that ethics—not ontology—is “first philosophy.” Ethics must come first, Levinas explains, because the “I” does not emerge as an existent until after the arrival of *autrui* (the other person, someone other than myself). Were it not for the other, nothing would oppose the notion that all is an extension of the self. *Autrui*, however, explodes this egoistic delusion by confronting me with that which cannot be reduced or assimilated to myself. At every moment, the other overflows and destroys all thoughts I can think of him. Or, as Levinas puts it, “He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal.”⁷ In his absolute alterity, the other reveals to me the boundaries of my being and in this manner constitutes me as a subject. I become an ego inasmuch as I am demarcated or delimited as such by the presence of the other.

But the self that is so constituted is also (and immediately) called into question. I cannot freely pursue my own interests in the face of the other, for the nudity and neediness I see in the face of the other lays claim to all that I would consume, control, or possess in such a pursuit. Arresting all egoism, the encounter with the other makes me responsible—not because I accept responsibility—but because the mere existence of the other makes this responsibility incumbent upon me. For Levinas, the essence of this responsibility is service. The face of the other commands me to give all that I have, to not merely be, but be for the other. Though I can try to ignore this summons, I can never “unhear” or silence it. According to Levinas, responsibility is the inexorable condition of human subjectivity. “To be” is always already to be “ordained,” to be called to a long and difficult life of service.

Paradoxically, this inexhaustible ordination does not diminish my subjectivity but actually invests it. Because I am the only one who can fulfill my

6. All quotations come from *The Tragedy of King Lear* (the Folio version) as reprinted in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997). Though I refer to F rather than Q, I do not think my reading is significantly affected by the choice of texts.

7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1988), 39.

obligation to the other, my obligation endows me with absolute individuality—what Levinas terms the “supreme dignity of the unique.” As Levinas writes, “I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject.”⁸ Moreover, the other person who gives me my identity also gives me my world, affording it a reality it could not otherwise possess. As Levinas explains, the exteriority of the world depends upon there being more to it than just me. Because the other provides me with the category of “not-me” that is the essence of exteriority, the other makes my world real. I know it to be actual rather than illusory exactly to the extent that I have it in common with the other.

All told, these ideas about exteriority, intersubjectivity, and infinite responsibility are quite difficult and carry with them some disturbing implications. However, I concur with Levinas that they are central to much of Shakespeare. Especially in *King Lear*—with its unflinching focus on interpersonal bonds “which are too intrinse t’unloose” (2.2.69)—Shakespeare explores what it means to be in relation to the other and to be responsible for the other. The stage for this examination is set in the very first scene, for the starting point for *Lear*, as for Levinas, is the traumatic encounter with one who cannot be made same-as-me.

When the drama begins, Lear is blithely doing what being does: seeking its own interests, maintaining its own existence, apprehending and assimilating the world unto itself. And for the purposes of personal enrichment, Goneril and Regan elect to play along. Venally performing the obsequious parts to which they have been assigned, they dissemble their otherness and present themselves as obedient extensions of Lear’s self. Their hypocrisy enables the king’s fantasies of self-sovereignty, and things move along smoothly enough. But with her bare “nothing,” Cordelia abruptly brings to an end this inauthentic play of the same. As Gayatri Spivak observes, Cordelia’s answer to the question, “What can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters?” derails everything—the meter as well as the moment.

CORDELIA.	Nothing my lord. [six syllables of silence]
LEAR.	Nothing? [eight syllables of silence]
CORDELIA.	Nothing. [eight syllables of silence]
LEAR.	Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

(1.1.83–88)⁹

As an answer to Lear’s question, Cordelia’s reply is incomprehensible, irrecoverable. The king cannot bend it to his will. To borrow from Levinas, we

8. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 101.

9. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching,” *Diacritics* 32 (2002): 20.

might say that Cordelia here exceeds her father's grasp by an essential dimension, even when he has her at his disposal.

Of course, Lear is not alone in his perplexity. For the better part of four hundred years, audiences, actors, and critics have struggled to make sense of Cordelia's comportment in the love contest, worrying over her words and wondering about her motives. Some have suggested that she acts as she does because she is confused, either too innocent or too naïve to know what is expected of her. Others have regarded her as obstinate or passive-aggressive, refusing to play her father's game because it demeans her and devalues love. Still others have seen her as intentionally hurtful, provoking her father so as to expose his arrogance and pride.¹⁰ What makes it so hard to settle upon a single interpretation is the strange way in which all seem to apply. As oxymoronic as it might be, Cordelia is humble, high-minded, and hostile—all at the same time. Yet this contradictory condition is precisely what Levinas identifies as the principal modality of the other. To look upon the other is to see both mastery and abjection—or, rather, mastery in abjection, since what gives the other power over me is precisely his nudity, destitution, and poverty. Such is Cordelia's situation in the play's opening scene. Standing before her father in the place of the inassimilable other, Cordelia confronts the king with a dispossessing defenselessness and a commanding vulnerability. She overwhelms him with what Levinas calls "the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance."¹¹

Whereas Goneril and Regan use rhetorical figures and theatrical masks to conceal themselves, Cordelia does not suppress her alterity. Instead of offering her father empty words, she offers him herself. For, whatever else Cordelia's bare "nothing" might mean, it is first and foremost an exposure: an opening of herself to the examination, indignation, and authority of the king. By way of her one-word answer, Cordelia as much as says: "You have asked me to declare my love, but I can say nothing beyond what I am. My answer is myself. Behold me here." This is not rhetoric but revelation.

But if Cordelia's response is a revelation, it is an unwelcome one, for it interrupts the egotistical exercise the king is attempting to oversee. Her

10. It is impossible to cite all the relevant readings, so a few representatives will have to suffice. Stanley Cavell is among those who see Cordelia's reply as an expression of confusion. Richard Halpern is less forgiving, emphasizing the cruelty of Cordelia's words and relating them to the more vicious revenges of Goneril and Regan. Eugene England tries to recuperate the painfulness of Cordelia's response by portraying her as a therapist/savior who only hurts her father to heal him. See Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 62–64; Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 248–49; and Eugene England, "Cordelia and Paulina: Shakespeare's Healing Dramatists," *Literature and Belief* 2 (1982): 69–82.

11. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

plainness upends everything by inverting in an instant the power relations that structure his contest. Having expended all his political capital to make himself the center of attention, Lear finds himself supplanted by a daughter whose powerlessness comprises a more compelling claim to that place. Her vulnerability speaks more loudly than his majesty, obliging him to attend to her. And in that moment of attention, Lear instantly knows himself to be a usurper, responsible to the one before him.¹² Rather than respond with care, however, Lear responds with rage. His anger is quite obviously an evasion, an attempt to duck his responsibility by casting blame on Cordelia. As Sears Jayne remarks, Lear reacts with “that violence which characterizes the actions of people who are stung by the consciousness of their own guilt.”¹³ The perverse logic of Lear’s passion goes something like this: “You have made me angry, so you must be in the wrong. Were I the offender, I would be feeling contrition. Instead, I am feeling outrage, which is the natural response to unjust treatment. Thus, the emotions you have made me feel prove that I am the victim here, the one to whom redress must be made.” In the palpable force of his anger, the king would validate his neglect of Cordelia, and the intensity of his ire is the measure of his self-betrayal, showing the lengths to which he must go to ignore the accountability he feels. Lear must crowd out his sense of responsibility with all-consuming anger if he is to persist on his selfish path.

And persist he does. From one moment to the next, Lear disowns his daughter and leaves her without a dowry, as if he could relinquish his responsibility by renouncing his paternity. Even when stripped of her filial status, though, Cordelia continues to stand before her father in the primary ethical relation of the-one-before-the-other. Her upright and exposed face is a perpetual reproof, a vision so searing that Lear cannot stand to look upon it. “Hence, and avoid my sight!” he roars (1.1.122). To elude the obligations otherness imposes upon him, Lear turns away from the face in which he has seen it:

Thou hast her, France. Let her be thine, for we
Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see
That face of hers again.

(1.1.260–62)

12. “What is . . . a solitary individual,” Levinas asks, “if not a growing tree without regard for all that it cuts off and destroys, absorbing the nourishment, the air and the sun, a being which is fully justified in its nature and its being? What is an individual if not a usurper? What does the advent of conscience mean . . . , if not the discovery of cadavers at my side and my horror of existing as a murderer?” (Levinas, quoted in Adriaan T. Peperzak, “Judaism and Philosophy in Levinas,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 40 [1996]: 135).

13. Sears Jayne, “Charity in *King Lear*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15 (1964): 278.

Rather than heed Kent's call to "See better, Lear," the king forswears forever the sight of his youngest daughter (1.1.156). While it is common for critics to parley these repeated references to sight into an overarching trope about eyesight and insight, Paul Alpers is right to remind us that looking in this play is primarily a form of connection, not perception. To look upon someone is to enter into relation with him or her. Thus, when Lear turns away from Cordelia what he rejects is not abstract moral truth but "actual human relationships that give rise to moral obligations."¹⁴ The king does not want to look on his daughter because he perceives in her naked face a naked command.

The pattern established with Cordelia repeats itself throughout the opening acts. Each time the king encounters alterity, he tries to escape the claim it makes on him, first by raging against the other, and then by demanding that he or she be removed from his field of vision. When Kent, for example, presents himself as "the true blank of thine eye," Lear tries not to look (1.1.157). He orders Kent to absent himself ("Out of my sight!" [1.1.155]) and then banishes him under penalty of death. Later, when Goneril and Regan cast off their false faces and reveal themselves as they really are, Lear showers them with curses. He cannot countenance his daughters the second they stop pretending to be the same as him. By this time, though, the king has surrendered his scepter and can no longer banish them as he has done Kent and Cordelia. Consequently, he exiles himself. Rather than submit to others, Lear takes to the heath, vainly seeking what Levinas terms "the salvation of a hermit."¹⁵ Before Lear will be for the other, he will try to be without the other, as if he could return—through sheer force of will—to an imaginary state prior to the arrival of the other and the claims he makes.

It is a fool's errand, destined to fail. There can be no "I" without the other, and Shakespeare suggests as much when the king, in his isolation, increasingly loses hold of himself and his world. Try as he might, Lear cannot keep it together. His sides come unbound. His tears pour forth. His sorrows rise up. His heart breaks into a hundred thousand flaws. For a materialist critic like Margreta de Grazia, this dissolution demonstrates the degree to which early modern personhood is tied to property, such that "what *one* is depends on what one *owns*."¹⁶ Thus, the sovereign who surrenders his

14. Paul J. Alpers, "King Lear and the Theory of the 'Sight Pattern,'" in *In Defense of Reading: A Reader's Approach to Literary Criticism*, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: Dutton, 1962), 135.

15. Levinas, quoted in Peperzak, "Judaism and Philosophy in Levinas," 135.

16. Margreta de Grazia, "The Ideology of Superfluous Things: *King Lear* as Period Piece," in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Sallysbrass (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 34.

crown and kingdom becomes a nobody or nothing; what the fool wittingly calls “an O without a figure” (1.4.158). Though this reading is both insightful and compelling, our appreciation for the identity effects of the objective relation in *Lear* should not overshadow the importance of the intersubjective one, especially since Lear’s self-stability is so closely connected to his proximity to others. It is when Lear tries to live outside of all interrelation that he feels his sanity slipping away, giving theatrical expression to Levinas’s statement that “the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world, within the ontology of sameness.”¹⁷ As Lear flees from the answerability that is uniquely his own, he retreats from the one thing that both dignifies and defines him. He declines from the “supreme dignity” and “inalienable identity” of the one who is answerable to the ignominy and anonymity of one who is but “Lear’s shadow” (1.4.196). Moreover, as Lear recoils from the alterity that is the condition of his exteriority, he causes his world to collapse upon itself. Out on the heath, the tempest without merges with the tempest within, for Lear has turned away from the human other who divides the interior from the exterior, giving shape and meaning to each. The tenuous reality of Lear’s world out on the heath is a direct consequence of his refusal to occupy it with another.

Of course, Lear cannot really regress to a state prior to the other. (The other always already precedes the ego.) But inasmuch as *Lear* imagines this possibility, it suggestively ties identity and exteriority to interrelation, indicating that both self and world would slip away without the other. In his self-imposed solipsism, Lear is stripped of subjectivity and set adrift in a formless, faceless universe that threatens to swallow him up. If he is to be brought back, the stage play intimates, it must be by way of the other person—the shivering fool, the naked beggar, the blinded father, the suffering servant, the downcast daughter—each of whom summons Lear back to himself by summoning him back to his obligation.

Many are the points of contact with Levinas’s work, where interrelation is said to deliver the self from the horrors of impersonal existence. Levinas refers to this state of being-less being as the “*il y a*” (the “there is”) and associates it with panic and dread. He maintains, however, that one does not escape “the anonymous and senseless rumbling of being” by asserting one’s self but by deposing one’s self, “in the sense one speaks of deposed kings.”¹⁸ This idea of deposition has obvious significance for Shakespeare’s play. Indeed, *Lear* can be seen to revolve around two types of deposition: one political and one ethical. The political deposition takes place early on,

17. Levinas, quoted in M. Jamie Ferreira, “‘Total Altruism’ in Levinas’s ‘Ethics of the Subject,’” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29 (2001): 462.

18. See the epigraph to this essay, and n. 1 above.

when Lear abdicates his throne and Goneril and Regan conspire to seize even the limited authority he would retain. Lear's ethical deposition, however, is another matter altogether. Nevertheless, this is the one toward which the play presses, pushing us to consider what it might mean to depose the ego and enter into disinterested relation with the other.

A number of critics have addressed the play's searching exploration of interrelation. Among the most insightful is Stanley Cavell, who seeks to understand why Lear turns away from characters like Kent and Cordelia, who quite plainly love him. Cavell ultimately concludes that the old man does not want to be loved—cannot bear to be loved—because love presents itself to him as a demand. Were he to acknowledge the affection of others, the king would be bound to deserve and reciprocate it. But this burden seems too large to bear, so Lear endeavors to avoid loving interrelation and all who offer it.¹⁹ This argument is elegant, and much of it can be harmonized with my own interpretation. Nevertheless, I hesitate to accede to the principle of reciprocity that Cavell uses to explain the relations of love and responsibility in *Lear*. By tying interpersonal obligation to the offer and acceptance of love, Cavell effectively makes the answerability of the king contingent upon the actions of the other. Lear is bound to love where he is loved, but where he is not loved, his obligations are much less clear. Cavell's reading, in other words, circumscribes personal responsibility within a network of symmetrical and mutually reinforcing demands, implicitly limiting Lear's obligation only to those who love him. The king must care for Cordelia, but he owes little (if anything) to Regan, Edmund, and Cornwall.

I find Shakespeare's play to be more exacting than this. If we apply a strictly reciprocal logic to the tragic action, it is difficult to fault Lear for hating the daughters who have betrayed him. Yet it seems clear to me that we are meant to wince when Lear savagely curses Goneril and then Regan. Their mistreatment of him does not condone his mistreatment of them. And truly, if the actions of the most virtuous characters in the play are to teach us anything, it is that commitment can have nothing to do with calculation or conditionality. The Fool, Kent, and Cordelia all give themselves to one who cannot be said to deserve their devotion, and their actions are approved for this very reason. If we are to give proper value to the play's most meaningful characters and moments, we must acknowledge that what they have in common is an unqualified altruism quite apart from all thoughts of reciprocity and all systems of exchange. This, I believe, is the ethical standard to which the play holds us.

Such extreme selflessness perhaps runs counter to our notions of justice and fairness, but for Levinas it is the only ethical response. He is adamant

19. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 57–62.

that my relation to the other is not a *quid pro quo*.²⁰ According to Levinas, my obligation to *autrui* has nothing to do with his behavior toward me. It is our relation that commands me, anterior to and irrespective of all action he might undertake. And since this summons inheres as long as I am in relation to the other, my obligation to him is endless. At no point can I limit it by saying "I have done enough" or "I have done my part" or "I am more sinned against than sinning."

To be clear, Levinas does not rule out justice and fairness. Quite the contrary, Levinas asserts that my obligation to all others (and not just the other currently before me) compels me to arbitrate between competing interests and pursue a course of justice. Similarly, there are considerations that intervene and require justice even for me. But the "I" who is obliged to seek justice for others can never do so for itself, for it is impossible for the self to give weight to its own interests over and against the interests of the other. While it might be reasonable to expect that my face commands the other just as his face commands me, or to assume that the claims he makes on me are counterbalanced by the claims I make on him, Levinas insists that the "I" cannot experience its interrelatedness from the outside, as a symmetry or reciprocity. The face of the other, Levinas frequently says, addresses me from an insuperable "height" or "elevation." He and I are never on equal footing. Before the other, I can know nothing but my own obligation.

According to Levinas, this radically asymmetrical relation brings the self into being. But some have objected that it must also bring the self unto destruction. Paul Ricoeur, for example, contends that the claim that the "I" can never be equal to the other leads inevitably to self-loathing, while the corollary claim that the "I" must give all to the other leads just as surely to self-annihilation.²¹ Significantly, a number of literary critics have seen Shakespeare's play as moving in the same direction. According to Richard Halpern, the tragedy imposes such impossible interpersonal demands upon its characters that self-destruction is the only viable response. In his view, the characters of *Lear* live and move in a zero-sum economy that does not allow for rational conservation. Consequently, what is ultimately "chosen" by the play as the most adequate response to its world of scarcity and struggle is aristocratic *dépense* or "self-destructive expenditure." If we are to

20. We gain a sense of Levinas's commitments here by noting that he distrusts and distances himself from the word "love" that is central to Cavell's analysis precisely because it implies reciprocity and familiarity. Levinas prefers instead "the harsh name for what we call love of one's neighbor," namely, "responsibility for my neighbor" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998], 103).

21. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (University of Chicago Press, 1992). For a concise summary of Ricoeur's critique, see Ferreira, "Total Altruism," 451–52.

credit Halpern's interpretation, we must conclude that all signs in *Lear* point toward aggressive self-annihilation.²²

Yet Levinas insists that suicide is no answer to answerability and advises, more generally, that "my responsibility for all can and has to manifest itself also in limiting itself."²³ Paradoxically, the basis for this self-limiting is the limitlessness of my responsibility. If the "I" is to support a responsibility that extends uninterruptedly into eternity and embraces an infinity of others, it must have a care for itself. The self must preserve and maintain itself if it is to have anything to give (in the first place) and if it is to continue being able to give (in the second place). Or as Jamie Ferreira puts it, we can speak of self-surrender without requiring self-annihilation because "the counterweight to GIVING ALL IS ALWAYS GIVING."²⁴ If responsibility is understood to be infinite, then it cannot be discharged in the matter of a moment, no matter how spectacular that moment might be.

There are, to be sure, a number of spectacular moments of self-sacrifice in Shakespeare's play. And it is true that Lear turns to "self-destructive expenditure" when his initial attempts to browbeat, banish, and turn his back on the other fail to give him the relief he seeks. In spite of his act 1 evasions, the king simply cannot escape the neighbor whose nudity and neediness overmaster him. Even in the wilderness, Lear is unmistakably summoned. Edgar runs onstage, and Lear must confess: "Thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (3.4.95–97).²⁵ So piercing is Poor Tom's poverty that Lear is compelled to respond. This time, however, he does not resort to anger or exile. Rather, he starts ripping off his raiment, literally exposing himself to feel what wretches feel. "Off, off, you lendings!" he bellows, "Come, unbutton here" (3.4.97–98). Lear's desperate disrobing seems to be of a different order than

22. Halpern, *Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, 264.

23. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 121–22, and *Otherwise than Being*, 128.

24. Ferreira, "Total Altruism," 454.

25. In these lines, we might find the rudiments of an early modern rationale for Levinas's claim that *autrui* is always and only human. Perplexed by his anthropocentric stance, several of Levinas's critics have asked why the "I" is not also ordained by the alterity of animals, or even plants. Though Levinas answers religiously (the human other bears "the trace of God," whereas plants and animals do not), the human exceptionalism established in Lear's speech is different. As Laurie Shannon has shown, it is a negative exceptionalism, predicated upon the underprovisioned condition of humankind. Whereas nonhuman animals are naturally "coated," the human creature Lear considers is uniquely naked, compelled to case himself in secondhand skins, or "lendings." Given Levinas's insistence on the essential nudity of *autrui*, Lear's vision of "unaccommodated man" seems relevant. As Shannon remarks, the "poor, bare, forked animal" we are made to see in the play raises the question of whether any animal other than the human may fairly be deemed "naked." See Laurie Shannon, "Poor, Bare, Forked: Animal Sovereignty, Human Negative Exceptionalism, and the Natural History of *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 60 (2009): 168–96.

his anger and selfestrangement. Yet Lear's self-exposure is no less of an evasion, for it is clear that the king is not undressing to relieve Edgar (to whom he does not offer the cast-off clothing) but to relieve himself. As was the case with Lear's wrath, his divestment turns out to be just another dodge, an attempt to put melodrama in the place of meaningful service. It is as if the king believes he can escape his obligation by making himself just as destitute (and therefore just as commanding) as the beggar before him. Or as if he can acquit himself of a lifetime of responsibility by performing one grand, self-destructive gesture. Instead of submitting himself, Lear magnificently attempts to undo himself.²⁶

Gloucester tries to escape his ordination in analogous fashion. Upon finally owning up to the enormity of his individual responsibility, Gloucester despairs of ever being equal to it and resolves to cast off his burden—as Lear has cast off his clothing—in one extravagant, self-consuming act. Bestowing his wealth upon a beggar, he hurls himself (as he supposes) off a cliff. Though Gloucester presents this intended suicide as a protest on the part of all humanity, such a sacrifice would benefit nobody but him. Taking his cue from Hamlet, who would “his quietus make / With a bare bodkin” (3.1.77–78), Gloucester embraces self-slaughter as a strategy for paying off or canceling his account.²⁷ By leaping into oblivion, Gloucester hopes to end not only his life but also his answerability.

If we attend to these scenes, however, we can see that Shakespeare's play does not permit self-sacrifice to take the place of true surrender any more than Levinas does. When Lear undresses and Gloucester falls face-first, the futility and absurdity of their actions is apparent. It cannot be the case that these self-destructive acts are “chosen” by the play when they have put so many in mind of the temper tantrums of young children and the buffoonery of circus clowns.²⁸ Even if Gloucester and Lear want to bow out in a

26. Act 3's “Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here” is revisited in act 5 when Lear asks of an attendant, “Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir” (5.2.84). Making the same basic request, but in a much calmer register, the king signals a shift in his character. This shift is even more significant if we take Lear to be making the request for Cordelia, rather than himself. In most productions, the king tugs at his own constricting collar when he speaks these lines, but he could be fumbling with Cordelia's. He is, after all, trying to resuscitate her, and undoing a button at her neckline would be commensurate with this. If staged like this, the scene would show a subtle yet striking reversal. The man who once tried to “unbutton” to escape his answerability now unbuttons to administer aid to another.

27. In the early modern period, a paid-off account was marked *Quietus est* (“laid to rest”), as the Norton edition states in a footnote to *Hamlet* (1706 n. 9).

28. Janet Adelman sees in Lear's actions “the rage of an abandoned infant.” G. Wilson Knight remarks that the king's “tremendous soul” is “incongruously geared to a puerile intellect.” According to Knight, “Lear is mentally a child; in passion, a Titan.” For Jan Kott, both Lear and Gloucester are “too ridiculous” to be tragic: they are “clowns who do not yet know they are clowns.” Nowhere is this more apparent than in Gloucester's attempt to end his life.

blaze of glory, the play will not let them. Self-sacrifice, or *dépense*, is not allowed as a final answer. Each of these suffering selves must pick himself up and keep going.²⁹ Indeed, it is this relentless drive that makes the play so poignant and so powerful. The summons to be otherwise works ceaselessly on Gloucester and Lear, such that they cannot ignore their ordination, even if they will not altogether assume it. Pricked again and again by their encounters with the other, the play's protagonists are pitched relentlessly forward, lurching toward transcendence.

This ragged trajectory has often been plotted along an axis of empathy or fellow feeling. Christian and humanist readings alike have long held that Shakespeare's Lear achieves redemption insofar as his torments teach him to feel what others feel.³⁰ In these interpretations, the king is said to take his first stumbling steps toward self-knowledge and salvation in 3.2, when he conceives a compassionate concern for the fool. The tender scene certainly seems like a turning point. We are out on the heath. The king is contending with the elements in self-righteous fury. The apocalyptic annihilation for which he has been calling appears imminent. But then his glance falls on the fool. The sight of the boy, skin-soaked and shivering, cuts Lear to the quick. He stops his shouting and says, "My wits begin to turn." Though many have taken these lines to announce a turn for the worse (Lear is really losing it now!), what follows is not the stuff of madness. For the first time in the play, Lear sets aside his obsessive interest in his own injuries and attends to the needs of another: "Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?" (3.2.66–67). As he addresses himself to the plight of the fool, Lear speaks with more reason and moderation than he has for some time. He also regains enough understanding to seek shelter from the storm. He conducts the fool to an outbuilding and invites him to enter, even offering him priority of place: "In, boy; go first" (3.4.26). Then, before taking shelter himself, Lear pauses to pray. Kneeling in the mud, the king

The attempted suicide, Kott writes, "is merely a circus somersault on an empty stage . . . the classic expression of buffoonery." See Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 118; G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Sombre Tragedies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 177, 179; and Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 90, 177, 117.

29. On this point, see also Lawrence, "Difficulty of Dying in *King Lear*."

30. Paul Siegel epitomizes the Christian approach, while Wendell Berry exemplifies the humanist approach. Jonathan Dollimore provides a useful overview of both Christian and humanist readings in *Radical Tragedy* before rejecting each for misguidedly mystifying the suffering of Lear and others. See Paul N. Siegel, "Adversity and the Miracle of Love in *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 6 (1955): 325–36; Wendell Berry, "The Uses of Adversity," *Sewanee Review* 115 (2007): 211–38; and Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 189–95.

pours out his heart to the houseless and the unfed, exhorting himself to “to take physic” and “expose thyself to feel what wretches feel” (3.4.26–34). It is a poignant moment, and many have taken it to express the overarching message of the play: namely, that compassion can cure us.

Levinas, however, is adamant that empathy is no achievement, and his critique of fellow feeling gives us reason to think twice about interpretations applauding Lear’s emergent desire to identify with others. In Levinas’s view, to see one’s neighbor as one’s self is not to respond to him but to totalize him, to make him an instance of one’s own categories. Empathy in this respect is but “egology”: an approach that reduces the other to an analogue of the self. This tiresome play of the same, Levinas maintains, cannot emancipate anyone—which is what we see when Shakespeare’s king seizes upon Tom o’ Bedlam as a second self, or partner in sorrows.

When Poor Tom rushes onstage, his wildness and weirdness are utterly astonishing. Lear, however, strives to close the gap between the stranger and himself by asserting an essential similarity. As if to blunt the force of Edgar’s alterity, Lear equates the beggar’s condition with his own.

Didst thou give all to thy two daughters,
And art thou come to this?
.....
Has his daughters brought him to this pass?
Couldst thou save nothing? Wouldst thou give ’em all?
(3.4.47–48, 59–60)

Though Kent objects that Poor Tom has no daughters, Lear is undeterred in his identification. He will not allow that Edgar’s situation might exceed his own: “Death, traitor! Nothing could have subdued nature / To such a lowness but his unkind daughters” (3.4.65–66). Lear’s approach is all wrong, and not just on points of fact. By comprehending Edgar’s suffering within the circumference of his own, Lear effectively denies Edgar’s difference and makes himself the model for all misfortune. Staged like this, Lear’s empathy looks a lot like narcissism.³¹ It is unseemly, and it does nothing to deliver Lear from the solitude of being that manifests itself in this play as madness. When Lear cozies up to Poor Tom as to a known quantity, his mental state precipitously declines. Before long, he is removing all his clothes—a sure sign of madness in Shakespeare’s day.³² As a corrective, then, to the conventional view that *Lear* is all about empathy, we ought to acknowledge that though the king comes to think of others as of himself,

31. On this point, see also Kearney, “‘This Is Above All Strangeness,’” 458–59.

32. See Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 130.

this is not enough to heal him. Indeed, it is in a fit of fellow feeling that Lear strips himself naked and provides conclusive proof that he is mad.

This is not to say that empathy is given no value in Shakespeare's play. (As egocentric as it may be, Lear's empathy is at least an attempt at relation.) It is to say, however, that empathy's limitations are everywhere implied. As Jonathan Dollimore remarks, the king who commits himself to the cause of "windowless poverty" after coming to "feel what wretches feel," draws attention to the difficulty of seeking social justice in fellow feeling: the majority is bound to remain poor, naked, and wretched if a king must share the suffering of his subjects in order to "care."³³ In the end, empathy cannot produce an ethical society—or even prevent an unethical one. As Levinas explains, empathy is incapable of preventing bad acts because its ethical effects diminish as soon as we tell ourselves that some people are not "really" the same as us, that some people are not as fully human as are we.³⁴ This is what the Nazis claimed of the Jews, and this is what Lear claims of his "pelican daughters" (3.4.70). Lear feels justified in offering violence to Regan and Goneril because he has determined that they are not persons but predators (wolves, foxes, serpents, curs). As is evident in the king's chilling "Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" (4.5.177), empathy is an inadequate ground for ethics because it is too easily qualified or set aside. If Lear is to be brought more fully into the realm of the ethical, something more will be required. Instead of encountering the neighbor as an alter ego (to be given equal consideration), Lear must encounter him as an other (to be given all). What is needed is not empathy but awe.³⁵

If we look at the moments wherein Lear is most authentically connected to other people, what we see is not empathy or understanding but profound embarrassment, even shame. The king is furthest from the mark when he feels "at home" with others: when he experiences the other as familiar, accommodating, or companionable. However, he comes closest to the play's ideal when he feels overwhelmed or at a loss—when his interactions are so disturbing, disarming, and dispossessing that he knows not what to do or say. This ethical discomfiture is most evident in his act 4 encounter with Cordelia, and it is for this reason that their reunion is rightly regarded as *Lear's* highest moment.

33. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, 191.

34. See Hilary Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35.

35. On the subject of sympathy versus awe, Jean's Marsden's work is suggestive. She observes that an English obsession with sympathy in the second half of the eighteenth century led to extensive revisions of *Lear*. "Here we can find," Marsden writes, "an attempt to bring Shakespeare into the realm of sympathy, to recast his tragedies in a form that inspired not awe but 'fellow-feeling'" (Jean Marsden, "Shakespeare and Sympathy," in *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Peter Sabor and Paul Yachnin [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008], 29).

Suffused as it is with gentle tones and soft music, the scene is unlike any other in the play.³⁶ Some of its elements, however, are familiar. When Lear rouses from sleep, Cordelia offers herself to him as she previously did in the love contest, inviting his gaze and subjecting herself to it. "Sir, do you know me?" (4.6.41), and "O look upon me, sir" (4.6.50). Lear shrinks back, confessing that Cordelia has ample cause to hate him. Her gentle reply is no more than a murmur: "No cause, no cause" (4.6.68). Like the "nothing" of act 1 that it echoes, Cordelia's "no cause" performs the literal operation of negation or denial. Yet the meaning of her words surpasses their linguistic function.³⁷ Analysis always feels inadequate to Cordelia's utterance because its meaning, as Levinas would say, lies not in the said (*le dit*) but in the saying (*le dire*). What gives "no cause" its significance is not only the content it communicates but also the approach it enacts. Her words will always be in excess of interpretation because Cordelia is not using signs so much as she is making herself a sign, delivering herself to her father in that discursive attitude of sustained exposure and incessant offer that Levinas calls "the very signifyingness of signification."³⁸

Where Cordelia's self-exposure pitched Lear into a fiery passion in act 1, it works differently on him in act 4. What we see now is not rage but responsiveness. When Cordelia bows her head to receive his blessing, Lear does not hold his hand over her in the gesture of authority but kneels before her in a posture of humility. This action, as Richard McCoy points out, revisits an earlier instance in which Lear has kneeled sarcastically to beg a daughter for food, bed, and raiment. There, the action was cruelly derisive and was rebuked as such ("Good sir, no more. These are unsightly tricks" [2.2.321–22]). But when Lear takes to his knees in act 4, the gesture seems genuine.³⁹ His submissiveness is so stirring, so sublime, that A. C. Bradley finds the scene "almost a profanity to touch."⁴⁰

When Margreta de Grazia looks upon this scene, she sees a man whose misfortunes have stripped him of selfhood. In his "*not* having," de Grazia writes, Lear is reduced to "*non-being*."⁴¹ Levinas, however, would see things differently. For Levinas, the king who kneels before Cordelia has not been

36. Music is explicitly indicated in Q, where the Doctor says: "Louder the music there!" (Q 4.21.23).

37. Alpers eloquently describes Cordelia's words as "almost speechless gestures—the verbal equivalents of simple physical contact" ("*King Lear* and the Theory of the 'Sight Pattern,'" 150).

38. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5.

39. Richard C. McCoy, "'Look upon Me, Sir': Relationships in *King Lear*," *Representations* 81 (2003): 50–51.

40. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," and "Macbeth"*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1905), 285.

41. De Grazia, "Ideology of Superfluous Things," 21.

plunged into “non-being” but has been moved “beyond being.” He has not ceased to be so much as he has begun to “be-otherwise.” This state of self-surrender is what Lear—and his play—has been groping toward from the very beginning. It is more than empathy, more than self-sacrifice, more than loving reciprocity. Edgar refers to it as “ripeness” (5.2.11), but Levinas calls it “passivity”—by which he does not mean inertia or apathy but rather a readiness to be moved by the other, to be called by him without anticipating or presuming to know what is required.⁴² This passivity, Adriaan Peperzak writes, “is lived in the humility of a devotion that is not planned but undergone.” It is the way of transcendence, but it is also the way of suffering. “To live for others is to suffer, and even to suffer gratuitously, without meaning, for nothing, because only such a passion unquestioningly realizes the unchosen, entirely disinterested character of transcendent passivity.”⁴³

Kent, Cordelia, and the Fool appear to inhabit this exhausting ethical space from the outset. They are, in Levinasian terms, hostage to the other: obsessed, afflicted, wounded, burdened. But what about Lear? The trajectory of the tragedy is shaped by his struggle to enter into the ethical. But does this arc eventually complete itself? The question is vexing, for the transcendent encounter of act 4 is followed by the cruel crosses of act 5, sorely testing the passivity Lear appeared to assume. At times, the king seems to relapse into his old evasions. When Cordelia, for example, wants to go see these daughters and these sisters, Lear’s anxious “No, no, no, no” calls to mind his earlier attempts to turn away from the face of the other (5.3.8). At other times, his responsiveness seems too tied to Cordelia. Though Lear will stop at nothing to succor his youngest, he can treat others, such as Kent and Gloucester, with apparent apathy and insensitivity. And even his intense devotion to Cordelia is alarming, since Lear’s bearing toward her oscillates uncomfortably between submissiveness and possessiveness. The final act forces us to wonder whether Lear has truly given himself to the ethical relation or whether he has merely adopted more subtle means to monopolize Cordelia’s affection and attention.⁴⁴

In the instant before his heart breaks, Lear gives us reason to believe he is sincerely answering his ordination, and our hope that this is so attests to the play’s success in impressing upon us its exacting ethical vision. The king’s attentiveness to Cordelia’s inert form, as Michael Holahan has

42. I adapt this phrasing from Catherine Chalié, “The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and the Hebraic Tradition,” in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

43. Adriaan T. Peperzak, “Transcendence,” in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, 191.

44. For readings that draw out the darker aspects of Lear’s demeanor and Cordelia’s commitment, see Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 121–29; and Maureen Quilligan, *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth’s England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 213–35.

shown, is an exquisite example of ethical perception and responsiveness.⁴⁵ And it is true, as Maynard Mack affirms, that Lear dies with no regard for himself. He draws his last breath “with his whole being launched toward another.”⁴⁶ Yet this altruistic posture is undermined by several of Lear’s last lines, some of which signal delusion (“This feather stirs. She lives” [5.3.239]), others indifference (“Prithee, away” [5.3.242]), and others wrath (“A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all” [5.3.243]). The play drives toward an ideal of ethical interrelation and absolute responsibility, but how close does the king come? After all is said and done, what we have witnessed remains enigmatic. Like the irreducible other, the tragedy resists our efforts to thematize its content or comprehend its meaning.⁴⁷

But even as the play frustrates our understanding, it requires our response. This requirement is especially acute in the case of Cordelia, for the king is not the only one caught up in the face-to-face encounter with her. As the drama draws to a close, Lear exhorts every person in the theater to cast eyes on his daughter: “Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips, / Look there, look there” (5.3.285–86).⁴⁸ In performance, it is not uncommon for the actor playing Lear to turn his body and speak these lines directly to the audience, rotating and elevating Cordelia’s inert form so as to present it to the seated spectators. The staging feels right, for in his last lines the king offers to each of us the daughter who has repeatedly offered herself to him. Yet what do we see if we obey Lear’s injunction and look? We see, to be sure, a beloved daughter who is dead, but we also see an actor who is dressed up and dissimulating. “Beholders are asked to see what may not exist,” Holahan writes, “for this is and is not Cordelia. Her character now appears only in an actor’s body’s mimicry of a past life—a striking union of death and theatrical illusion.”⁴⁹ The “Cordelia” we are asked to consider is a theatrical construct: a person masked in a dramatic character. To what degree, then, can we live up to Lear’s final command and look on, lament, and love this virtuous girl? Is it even possible for us to submit ourselves to a simulation?

Cavell believes that it is. Even as he concedes that our acknowledgment of Cordelia cannot be completed, Cavell downplays the difference between acknowledging a theatrical character and acknowledging an actual person.

45. Michael Holahan, “‘Look, Her Lips’: Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997): 406–31.

46. Maynard Mack, “*King Lear*” in *Our Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 100.

47. This is not to equate *King Lear* with *Autobi*. It is simply to note that the economy of the same interrupted by the other is also interrupted by our experience of *Lear*.

48. These lines appear only in F.

49. Holahan, “‘Look, Her Lips,’” 412.

In both instances, he says, the difficulty lies in presenting ourselves to others to be recognized and commanded by them. Since dramatic characters do not and cannot take cognizance of us, this self-presentation seems especially difficult in the theater. But Cavell maintains that the problem inheres in every interrelation. Bound up within our own egos, you and I never occupy the same site. Thus, what is the case inside the theater is also the case outside of it. It is true that we cannot put ourselves in the presence of a theatrical character, but we cannot put ourselves in the presence of a real person, either. But though I cannot put myself in your presence, I can put myself in your present—and I do so by making your present mine. By suspending my egocentric perspective and surrendering the moment to you, I can make the present yours and put myself in it. This is how we acknowledge another person, and this is how we acknowledge Cordelia.⁵⁰

Cavell's argument makes sense, but it depends on the elision of the actor. If we are to talk about surrendering ourselves to Cordelia's present, we must use the plural, for when Cordelia is before us there are two "presents" present. There is the present of the girl who is trying to help her father, and there is the present of the actor who is trying to enact the assigned role. Can we make one present without the other? Can we concentrate on Cordelia to the exclusion of the actor? The actor's "present" would seem to persist, no matter how enthusiastically we embrace the illusion. Were the actor to stumble, or sneeze, or say something surprising, we would instantly be aware of her "present," not Cordelia's. The actor in this scene is invisible to us only to the extent that she conforms to the expectations we are constantly applying to her. But if she should surpass, disappoint, or alter our idea of who Cordelia is and how Cordelia should act, the actor and her agency are immediately on our minds. How can the actor not exist in this scenario, if we are perpetually overseeing her and her actions?

As audience members, we may want to give ourselves entirely to Cordelia, but a part of us will always be attentive to the actor: to her skill in simulating loss (How believable this is!), to her success in evoking our wonder (What a remarkable performance!)—even to her safety in the final scene (Is the actor playing Lear going to be able to carry her safely?). The artifice of the event intrudes. It divides our attention and makes us see double. Knowing that this is a simulation, we cannot fully commit ourselves to the characters on the stage. We may feel their grief and pain, but our experience of it is diminished by the knowledge that it is dissembled. Thus, at the same time that *King Lear* demands our response, it also constrains it. The play preaches the importance of an ethical openness it does not altogether allow.

50. See Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 97–110.

Lear calls attention to the inadequacy of our response when he staggers onstage with Cordelia's lifeless body. His rebuke indicts the audience as well as the actors/characters at his side:

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones.
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack.

(5.3.231–33)

As Marianne Novy observes, no spectator can respond accordingly, and our inability is profoundly embarrassing. For Novy, this unsettling insufficiency instills within each of us a keen sense of isolation. As we watch on in silence while Lear bursts his lungs and then his heart, we come to feel a sharp separation not only from the characters onstage but also from our fellow spectators. Nevertheless, Novy insists that this feeling of isolation ultimately gives way to a sense of solidarity. I cannot know if you and I are feeling the same thing, and I cannot deny that neither of us is feeling enough, but the simple fact that we are both feeling something (whatever it is) attests to a basic connectedness that, finally, fashions us into a community of care. "The one consolation that [Shakespeare] offers—and in a theater it is a significant one—is that we feel each other's loss because of our basic connection." Although our emotional response to Lear's tragedy will never rise to the height it deserves, it is—at least for Novy—enough to knit us together.⁵¹

The connectedness that Novy envisions, however, is hard to see onstage. At the close of the play, the surviving characters remain painfully and awkwardly apart. Albany tries to establish some form of sociality, but his proposal to reconstitute the realm under the joint rule of Kent and Edgar falls flat. Kent is intent on suicide, while Edgar makes no answer at all. Who will rule the kingdom and what will become of it are left as open questions, muddled even more by the fact that the play's final speech, which would customarily spoken by the royal successor, is inconsistently assigned to Albany in the Quarto and to Edgar in the Folio.⁵² In a certain sense, this incertitude is apt: the nomination of a new king is hardly relevant, for the kingdom he would inherit has disintegrated. No longer a society, Albion is now a number of atomistic individuals, aloof and embarrassed. Their disso-

51. Marianne Novy, *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 163.

52. Contemporary critics tend to see Edgar as the more suitable successor (as implied in F), but Richard Dutton and Tom Clayton show that there is a case to be made for Albany as well. See Richard Dutton, "King Lear, *The Triumphs of Reunited Britannia* and 'The Matter of Britain,'" *Literature and History* 12 (1986): 146–47; and Tom Clayton, "'The Injuries That They Themselves Procure': Justice Poetic and Pragmatic, and Aspects of the Endplay, in *King Lear*," in *"King Lear": New Critical Essays*, ed. Jeffrey Kahan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 198–203.

ciation is distressing, and it prods us to consider a number of difficult questions concerning ethics, sociality, and politics. Among other things, we are brought to wonder whether the ethical relation can coalesce into—or even coexist with—the political relation. In a play world that places such weight on intersubjectivity and individual responsibility, is politics even possible?

Lear appears to answer in the negative, seemingly because politics—as imagined in the play—would put limits on responsibilities that are limitless. Even though Lear’s regime instills within its subjects a sense of exorbitant duty, the expression of this duty (whether sincere or not) is too narrow. All devotion is directed at the king, who is officially enthroned as the singular other, the one whose plenipotent voice drowns out every other summons. By restricting responsiveness to the royal court, the monarchical structure of *Lear* would elide the existence and ignore the neediness of the non-regal other. Moreover, by channeling altruism into the well-defined and well-worn conventions of courtly service, the play’s political system would distance its subjects from the unpredictable passivity that is the essence of the ethical. Court forms are too rigid, insisting upon choreographed behaviors and chivalric displays instead of openness and sincerity.

Even the king is too constrained by the monarchical model, inasmuch as his royal office subsumes his self in such a way as to inure him to the “elevation” of *autrui* and impedes him from responding as a flesh-and-blood individual to the other before him. The king is not an “I” but a “we,” and the metaphysical plurality of his person inhibits him from assuming the ethical stance of the one-for-the-other. This difficulty is evident in the very first scene, as Lear slips in and out of the third person, recurrently using the royal “we” to make personal demands.⁵³ His erratic usage is indicative of his inability to separate his self from his scepter, an inability that confuses his conversation and complicates his approach to the other. To truly address himself to the other, a king would have to extract himself from his office: he would have to speak in the first person. Henry V attempts something of the sort on the eve of the battle at Agincourt, but he butts up against political impossibility. To enter into relation, a king must do more than borrow a cloak. He must truly depose himself before the other, which would seem to leave us—at least in the case of *Lear*—without a prince and without a polity.

Simon Critchley denies that ethics and politics are incommensurable, claiming to the contrary that an ethics of individual responsibility exists “for the sake of politics.”⁵⁴ This may well be true, but Shakespeare’s tragedy is silent on how it could be so. Aside from the evils of anarchy, the play does

53. See Jerry Wasserman, “‘And Every One Have Need of Other’: Bond and Relationship in *King Lear*,” *Mosaic* 9 (1976): 22.

54. Simon Critchley, “Five Problems in Levinas’s View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them,” *Political Theory* 32 (2004): 182.

not present an alternative to monarchy. There is no purer ethico-political system waiting in the wings, ready to step in and save the gored state. Instead of trying to sketch out a political situation in which individual responsibility could be actualized and honored, *Lear* simply abandons politics altogether. The drama that begins with royal edicts and courtly ceremony concludes with stateless sincerity and direct address. At play's end, there is neither king nor kingdom—only responsibility. The relentless pursuit of the ethical pulls the play away from its political underpinnings, perhaps positing politics as antiethical.

But if *Lear*'s emphasis on individual responsibility leaves us without a recognizable political system, it also leaves us without a recognizable ethical system. Though the play thrusts us into the realm of the ethical (*l'éthique*), this realm does not resolve into an ethics (*une éthique*).⁵⁵ Or, to put it another way, the drama does not yield up or yield to a set of general rules capable of determining the proper course of action anterior to or outside of the event. Categorical imperatives cannot tell us what Cordelia ought to do when asked to profess her love, or what Lear ought to do when betrayed by his eldest daughters, or what Edgar ought to do when solicited by his suicidal father. Clearly, these characters must respond to the other, but the quality of their response remains rooted in the moment, deeply infixed in "ripeness" and "feeling" rather than in precepts and rules. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., the treachery of Edmund, the cruelty of Cornwall and Regan), the challenging emotional landscape of this play is not to be navigated by a priori ethical precepts—which is one of the many reasons it feels so Levinasian to me. Whereas someone like Kant envisions ethics as a matter of principle, such that uprightness consists of accepting and enacting impersonal, rational rules, Levinas believes it is unconscionably reductive to regard the other or my relation to him as universal instances or generic abstractions. The other is neither an instance nor an abstraction: he is who he is. Consequently, the ethical experience must be personal and particular, not principled.⁵⁶ Levinas argues—and I think *Lear* is in broad agreement—that one cannot resort to preconceived imperatives if one is to respond authentically. Rather, what one must do is resign oneself to a thoroughgoing passivity in which responsiveness is determined wholly in the moment, entirely by the other.

After all, this is exactly what the play calls for at the close. As Edgar (or is it Albany?) speaks the last lines of the play, he affirms the necessity of an exhaustively personal response that goes far beyond our sense of what "should" be said in such a situation.

55. I am indebted to John Llewelyn for the distinction between *l'éthique* and *une éthique*. See John Llewelyn, "In the Name of Philosophy," *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 39.

56. In contrasting Kant and Levinas, I lean heavily on the ideas and phrasing of Hilary Putnam. See Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism," 54–55.

The weight of this sad time we must obey,
 Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
 The oldest hath borne most. We that are young
 Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

(5.3.298–302)

Platitudes are too paltry for what we have witnessed. If we are to do justice to the suffering and exposedness of those before us, we must offer more than our conventional expressions of consolation. We must bravely enter that unscripted, self-delivering realm of discourse that Levinas calls “conversation” and that Shakespeare calls “speaking what we feel.”⁵⁷

But perhaps I go too far in giving such ethical weight to a stage play written and presented primarily as an entertainment. In spite of the early moderns’ enthusiasm for poetry’s ability to delight and to instruct, art and ethics are not identical. In fact, the distance between them can be such that we might wonder whether they are ever in alignment, whether art can ever bring about an ethical end. If the ethical is imagined as an encounter with radical alterity, what can be the value of the simulation? On this question, Levinas is equivocal, if not contradictory. On the one hand, he distrusts art as an escape or an evasion. Art can give us selfish pleasure and enable our flight from the real world, thereby offering us false transcendence. In this respect, art is an idol: a lifeless object put in place of the other. On the other hand, Levinas openly acknowledges his philosophical debts to the great authors of Russia and western Europe and frequently refers to their literary works in his own writings. (The most obvious example is the line from *The Brothers Karamazov* that Levinas adopts as his motto, quoting it no less than twelve times in his published work.)⁵⁸ The best authors, Levinas will say, not only recognize and resist art’s idolatrous potential but also wrestle with core philosophical questions, such as the meaning of life and the meaning of the human. In this way, the best art can prepare one for authors like Plato and Kant. What is more, it can also model the way out of being. According to Levinas, good art can imitate a form of ethical discourse by continually interrupting itself and calling itself into question.⁵⁹

57. “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I . . . The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51).

58. “We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others” (Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett [New York: New American Library, 1957], 264).

59. For useful summaries of Levinas’s statements on art, see C. Fred Alford, “The Opposite of Totality: Levinas and the Frankfurt School,” *Theory and Society* 31 (2002): 238–39; and Gerald L. Bruns, “The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas’s Writings,” in Critchley and Bernasconi, *Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 206–33.

King Lear, it would seem, does this in spades. The tragedy assails us in our unknowing. At play's end, we are baffled and bewildered—and compelled to speak even so. But what can we say? Or, to put a finer point on the question, what can we say that will not violate the terms of our speaking? Can we speak in a way that does not reduce or thematize? If it is true that great literature, like *Lear*, can imitate a form of ethical discourse, is it possible for literary criticism to do the same? As I draw this essay to a close, I would like to touch briefly on this question by considering how a Levinasian perspective might influence not only our experience of the drama but also our critical reception of it. In doing so, I make what is admittedly a perilous leap from stage plays to scripture, proposing to think about Levinas's approach to the Talmud as both a mode and model of literary criticism.⁶⁰

Though Levinas took pains to separate his Talmudic writings from his philosophical writings (e.g., publishing each with different publishers), both endeavors are characterized by an antipathy toward totalization. With regard to scripture, Levinas unsurprisingly insists that the commentator's task is not to solve, settle, or decipher the text. He speaks instead of "renewal." "The life of the Talmudist," Levinas writes, "is nothing but the permanent renewal of the letter through the intelligence."⁶¹ No amount of erudition or historical contextualization or critical knowledge can substitute for the unceasing work of asking questions of the text, since anything other than this has the effect of turning the text into a dead letter, an academic artifact containing obscurities without interest. For Levinas, the truth of the Talmud is inextricable from the light each individual sheds upon it; consequently, Talmudic thought must needs foster a dynamic pluralism—not to delight in relativism but to honor the infinite density of the Word, which requires the multiplicity of persons to express itself and unfold in the course of time.⁶²

While it might seem like the worst kind of bardolatry to say that Shakespearean criticism could or should follow Levinas's Talmudic pattern, I am nonetheless attracted to a hermeneutic that favors renewal over resolution. Such an approach would oppose an analytic order that tries to contract a plenitude of responses into a handful of "right" readings and that tramples

60. As Jill Robbins demonstrates in her admirable study of Levinas and literature, it is virtually impossible to cull a coherent theory of literary criticism from Levinas's thought and practice. By turning to his Talmudic writings, I oversimplify the situation and draw what might be unpardonable parallels. Nevertheless, I hope that the suggestiveness of the maneuver will make up for its recklessness. See Jill Robbins, *Altered Realities: Levinas and Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

61. Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 79.

62. This paragraph is drawn from Catherine Chalié, "Levinas and the Talmud," trans. Annette Aronowicz, in Critchley and Bernasconi, *Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 103–4.

individuality underfoot in its expectation that all informed readers and audience members respond alike. Such an approach would recognize that agreement and unicity can dry up the wellsprings of meaning and significance and would embrace instead the unsettling effects of multiplicity and plurality, which do not appease us with a self-satisfying sense of knowledge but send us back to the text, obsessed and enthralled. Such an approach would begin to resemble what Simon Critchley, in a slightly different context, calls “dissensual emancipatory praxis”: a relentless disturbing of the idyll of consensus, not to do away with consensus (or criticism) but to bring about its endless betterment.⁶³ The ethical possibilities toward which Levinas directs us (if only indirectly) are to be realized in a literary criticism that does not thematize but throws open, upsetting our apprehension in such a way as to reaffirm the richness of the text and the range and depth of responses it can draw forth. This kind of criticism would not be defined by dogmatism but would depend instead upon the incessant questioning of all: the disciple as well as the master. This criticism would strive to keep our responsiveness from rigidifying into a stultifying totality. It would aim at something akin to “the permanent renewal of the text through the intelligence.”

And perhaps no stage play lends itself to this type of criticism as readily as Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. With its challenging portrayal of our intersubjective situation and the infinite responsibility to which this puts us, the play text ushers us into a distressed and difficult realm of relation. To experience this tragedy is to be called into question: to be both traumatized and summoned. It is difficult to ignore this state of ordination, even though it most certainly exceeds us. We think and talk and write about the play with particular energy because it is in and through our responsiveness that we begin to uphold our noninterchangeable obligation and in this manner approximate the ethical ideal at the heart of the play.

Literary criticism as an act of ethical responsiveness? Speak what we feel, indeed.

63. Critchley uses the term in a discussion of Levinas and politics. Noting that government tends to become tyrannical when left to itself, Critchley commends the way Levinas’s ethical ideas can cultivate forms of “dissensual emancipatory praxis” that “work against the consensual idyll of the state, not in order to do away with the state or consensus, but to bring about its endless betterment” (“Five Problems in Levinas’s View of Politics,” 183).